



Flooding in the Context of the Barotse People of the Upper Zambezi Wetlands

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Abstract

Much of the historical and contemporary view of flooding is that it is a hazard which threatens property and life, as well as development and social activity. Whilst agreeing that this view is contextually appropriate to restricted places of the world, it is, however, not universal to all regions of our planet Earth. There are several cultural practices that welcome flooding for various cultural, ecological and geophysical explanations. This paper picks on one such cultural practice, namely, that of the Lozi speaking people of the Western province of Zambia. In this regard the presentation seeks to highlight the garment school of thought in the understanding of floods by using the case and experience of the Lozi-speaking people.

Background

Many of my generation born around the late-1950s, and those on either side of it, were brought up on a limited range of understanding of floods, in general, and the Zambian Lozi (Barotse) flood, in particular. Of these forms of understanding, probably the most used idea of flood in the world was that captured by G.F. White as follows:

... it has become common in scientific as well as popular literature to consider floods as great natural adversaries which man seeks persistently to overpower. According to this view, floods always are watery marauders which do no good, and against which society wages a bitter battle (1945:1).

According to this view, floods are an enemy phenomenon, which justifies water to be regarded as an unwanted commodity among hydrological engineers in particular (Butler, 1972). This is despite the point made centuries back by Thales, the founder of the Milesian School of Cosmologists, that ultimate reality is one and it is causally made of water (Burnet, 1961). In short, although floods are sometimes considered to be desirable, the predominant concept of them historically has been that they were 'hazards' which devastated or threatened people and property. In view of this understanding, it was believed that the Lozi (Barotse) people of Upper Zambezi wetlands in Western Zambia shifted from their flooded plains around March/April of each year to upland homes in order to escape from hazardous floods which threatened their lives and property. Such descriptions of the flood experience of the Lozi, and other diluvian

cultures such as the English Fenlanders of 17th century, was rarely realised by scholars and observers to have been largely based on metaphorical vision, in particular. This paper attempts to:

- Contextualise the ‘hazard’ school of thought by explicating its locus within the enemy metaphorical vision.
- Highlight the ‘garment’ school of thought in the understanding of floods by using the case and experience of the Lozi-speaking people of Western Zambia.

The Heritage of Metaphorical Vision

It has already been stated at the start of this paper that many members of my generation born around the late 1950s may be inheritors of a particular view of flood. Sometimes, the nature of a heritage is something which practitioners imbibe within their conceptual system often unconsciously and, hence, uncritically. That has been the nature of ‘metaphorical vision’ which many people in both the developed and developing worlds have been unconsciously operating under, without realising or questioning it.

As author of this paper, I adopt the following definition of ‘metaphorical vision’:

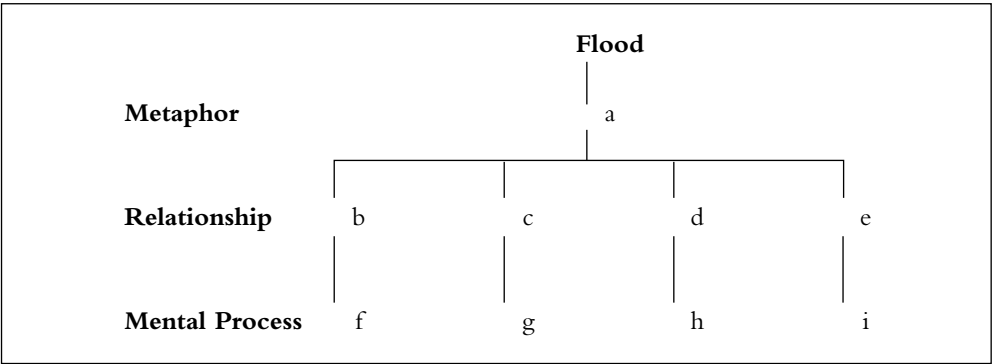
What I mean by the term ‘metaphorical vision’ is the tendency for a society to seize upon one metaphor in particular as the central vehicle through which it seeks to comprehend its world. Choice of one metaphor rather than another is highly indicative of the needs and aspirations of that society. The chosen metaphor is exploited for all its implications, around which a systematic world vision is elaborated (Mills, 1982:238).

It is hereby suggested that, in line with the popular and scientific understanding of flood noted above from White (1945), much of the contemporary view of flood is based on the enemy metaphor. In other words, the ‘enemy’ metaphorical vision is defined in this presentation to be the central idea of the contemporary understanding of flood.

Operational Definition of Terms

A working definition of ‘flood’ as used in this paper refers to a larger than usual body of water which, at one and the same time during its inundation, radiates a single metaphorical idea which centrally expresses and supports various relationships and mental processes, directly or indirectly reflective of that singular metaphor. This definition can be applied to various terms associated with flood, such as deluge, inundation or freshwater floods and saline (marine) floods. The paper focuses on freshwater riverine floods, specifically those of the upper Zambezi River associated with the Lozi people who are often alternatively referred to as the Barotse people in written literature. Figure 1 depicts the working definition of flood noted above in graphic form.

Figure 1. A flood



Several points crucial to this argument are worth noting from Figure 1. Firstly, there is only a *single flood metaphor* upon which everything else thereafter rests; that is, in terms of relationships, mental processes, institutions and cultural feats. Such a metaphor (labeled as ‘a’ in the diagram) can be that of the *enemy, garment* (friend) or variants of these dichotomies, namely, *both enemy and garment* or *neither enemy nor garment*. In as far as garments beautify and support human bodies in various ways, reference to floods as garments in this paper is understood to portray the idea that floods are friendly phenomena to people. In other words, a flood is a friend to people when it covers land and supports land-based activities in various ways. In theory, therefore, four different metaphorical visions of flooding are possible, that is, the ‘enemy’ and ‘garment’ as well as the ‘*both enemy and garment*’ plus the ‘*neither enemy nor garment*’.

In affirming the existence of these four metaphorical approaches to flood, it is also acknowledged that each of them is valid, acceptable and appropriate to its context. In other words, oppositional reasoning which negates or berates any of the four approaches would not be professionally appropriate. There are contextually-valid explanations for each of the four metaphors of flooding in line with cultural, geophysical and other features of each people’s landscape.

The ‘garment’ metaphor is, therefore, used interchangeably with the ‘friend’ metaphor in this paper. In reference to Noah’s flood, the metaphor of garment as it applies to flooding comes from Psalms 104:6. In confirming that metaphors are central to biblical thought (Macky, 1990), it is hereby proposed that the metaphorical vision of ‘flood-garment’ has always been dormant in scholarly thinking throughout history in one form or the other, but real. In this paper, only the enemy and garment flood metaphors will be outlined, and it will be highlighted that the popular academic notion of ‘flood-hazard’, including a few others, are rooted in the enemy flood metaphor. Secondly, the four general relationships expressed and supported by a flood metaphor are:

- Human to human relationships (called ‘b’ in the diagramme).
- Human to species relationships (called ‘c’).
- Human to flooding relationships (called ‘d’).
- Human to supernatural relationships (called ‘e’).

Thirdly, each of these general relationships is held in place by a particular type of mental process (namely, 'f', 'g', 'h' and 'i'). All these four mental processes, therefore, can reflect or be rooted into a single flood metaphor of the 'enemy', 'garment' (friend) or variants of these metaphorical dichotomies. This situation where a particular flood regime can accommodate four different mental processes which are, in turn, holding in place four varying relationships at one and the same time is crucial. It advances our understanding of flood because, previously, some scholars had not imagined that certain ordinary, day-to-day concepts could, in fact, be flood concepts (Figure 1). Concepts are used interchangeably with mental processes in this paper. Moreover, scholars were often amazed at contradictions in behaviour exhibited by flood occupants who, on the one hand, were devastated by floods but, on the other, refused to vacate and relocate to other places. It is likely that such flood occupants experienced two or more varying mental processes of flood at one and the same time and reacted to them accordingly. The 'both – and' flood metaphor or 'neither – nor' could, in this case, apply. In this regard, it is not absolutely clear in which category the Egyptian notion of flood falls because the water brought soil nourishment alongside destruction and maiming of the populace.

Using the above-presented premise, we may now define the enemy and then friendly flood perspectives in that order by critically designating the received literature and concepts in each flood perspective. We start below with the 'enemy' flood perspective.

Flood as an enemy

Drawing from the premise established in Figure 1, the enemy flood tradition can be operationalised as an academic and social custom of mental processes sustaining human relationships whereby the notion of hostility as radiated by the flood metaphor of enemy is central. A typical flood poem eulogising the enemy idea of flooding comes from the Dutch culture as follows:

*Green are the fields and fruitful; men and flocks,
Straight away at ease here on the new-born earth,
Make their abode along the massive dike
Built by a daring and industrious people.
Here within, a land like paradise,
Without, the flood that rages to the brink
As it crumbles the dike, ready to rush in fury.
The people, as one man, hurry to close the breach.*
(Wagret, 1967:279)

The idea of flood as an enemy eulogised in the above poem meant that for centuries, people thought of 'taming the flood' in different ways, as illustrated by Purseglove (1989). This mentality resulted over the years in the drainage of floods from wetlands and, concurrently, in the taming of various wetland dwellers by the drainage undertakers. Many flood cultures and landscapes were drained in due course, giving rise to a possible environmental crisis requiring further investigation at the moment.

Flood as a friend

On its part, the friendly view of flooding as an academic idea refers to a flood which radiates relationships and mental processes of an amiable nature within the environment the water inundates because of the centrality of the 'garment' metaphor. In other words, this tradition is potentially an academic and social custom of mental processes sustaining human relationships whereby the notion of amity as radiated by the flood metaphor of 'garment' is central. There are different case examples of the practice of flood as a friend, such as the 17th-century English Fenlanders, the pre-drainage Sudanese Nuer cultures as well as the Zambian Lozi-speaking people. The illustration below comes from the 16–17th Century English Fenlands when these areas were controversially subjected to Dutch drainage projects:

Is it desirable, in the first place, that land should be reclaimed? Not to those who exist by water; not to those who have no need of firm ground beneath their feet. Not to the fishermen, fowlers and reed-cutters who made their sodden homes in those stubborn swamps took to stilts in time of flood and lived like water rats. Not to the men who broke down the medieval embankments and if caught were buried alive in the very breach they had made. Not to the men who cut the throats of King Charles's Dutch drainers and threw their bodies into the water they were hired to expel (Swift, 1983:8–9).

As noted earlier, the metaphor of flood as garment comes from Psalms 104:6 within some growing realisation noted by Macky (1990) that metaphors are central methodological frames of reference for interpreting the Bible. In this regard, it is suggested that the intellectual essence of the friendly view of flooding based on the garment metaphor involves a situation where a leader and his people living in a flood plain willingly allow floodwaters to inundate their territory (like a garment covering something) for positive effects such as affording a flood ceremony, until the same waters achieve an expanse over land to render the resultant area as 'flood – garment'.

The Biblical tale of Noah's Ark and the Flood, henceforth, becomes a contested event which the hazard school, on the one hand, claims belongs to an enemy phenomenon whose predominantly destructive potential was only avoided by advance divine warning to Noah and his family (Park, 1991). This connotation of flood is often interpreted from Genesis 6–9 (Dundes, 1988). On the other hand, it is clear that Noah willingly consented to God's plan to inundate Noah's territory to produce a flood garment situation. Ordinarily, a garment is never an enemy object to people wearing it. If anything, people make every imaginable effort to make a garment to be colourful, spectacular and clean in its supportive role to the body wearing it. Apart from Psalms 104:6, the idea of flood as a friend can, in this regard, be interpreted from the Ark which Noah made (Genesis 6:14–22) to be a form of adjustment technology meant to willingly allow the inundation of the world by flood for its supportive role of cleansing the area from evil.

Flooding Among the Barotse People

The Lozi (Barotse) people of Western Zambia are currently among the few ethnic groups in the world with a distinct floodwater ceremony called the *Kuomboka*. Just like Noah did with his people, among the Lozi, an ark-like vessel locally called *Nalikuwanda* is constructed to permit inundation of their country by floodwaters. The Lozi-speaking people deliberately allow water to flood part or a whole of their land to create a valuable, scenic and ecologically productive area to be enjoyed by the people and wildlife. The Lozi eulogise the spectacle in a flood poem which goes as follows:

*It is flood time in Bulozhi.
The floodplain is clothed in the water garment.
Everywhere there is water!
There is brightness!
There are sparkles!
Waves marry with the sun's glory
Birds fly over the floods slowly,
They are drunken with cool air.
They watch a scene which comes but once a year
Floods are beautiful.
Bulozhi is the flood's dwelling place.
Every year floods pay us a visit.
A Lozi does not beg for floods.
We do not resort to herbs to bring floods.
We practice no witchcraft whatsoever.
These are floodwaters, indeed!
The floods are ours.
They know their own route.
They know their own home.
They know where they are needed.
They know where they are cared for.
And when we ourselves see them we are filled with happiness,
Our hearts become lighter
We do not fear the floods.
Floods are a Lozi's patelo
When the floods are in, we prepare the royal boat.
It is a happy occasion in Bulozhi.
Listen! The royal drums boom in the palace,
Calling the paddlers, young and old.
Floods are a Lozi's Patelo
The royal drums are never bought,
They cannot be priced,*

*They cannot be given away
We might give away cobs of maize or fishes,
But the royal drums are ours and ours alone.
Their booming sound stirs our blood.
We get wild with our cultural heritage,
We dress in animal and lion skins.
Floods, the Kuomboka Ceremony and the royal drums
Are all ours alone.*
(Translated from Sibetta, 1983)

In this flood poem, the metaphor of garment appears in the second line. *Patelo* in Lozi means a public, open space in the centre of a village. When applied to floods this *patelo* is sometimes called water arena. Readers are asked to imagine qualities of a garment which would also apply to floods to produce positive effects or impacts. Many of these garment-based qualities help to imbue Lozi's with cultural attributes arguably only unique to them; for instance, a highly developed cultural complex of respect locally called *likute*.

The value of 'garment' as a metaphor of flood giving rise to a watery *patelo* among the Lozi-speaking people spans historical and contemporary times. Almost all Lozi productive activities, movements and monthly calendars are tied to the flood regime. Gluckman (1968) has ably documented this factor, and states that social life moves with every change of the waters and the associated changes of weather. To the Lozi-speaking people, the flood centrally influences their philosophical, religious and cultural approaches to life as well as their economic, aesthetic and other elements of life.

The following outline of the annual calendar illustrates the point that the presence or absence of floods in Barotseland is crucial to, and central in determining people's livelihoods and productive activities:

- January (*Sope*) – means that the flood is coming; and this is the month of much new food of many kinds. The main work is gardening, planting and weeding.
- February (*Yowa*) – means that the flood comes; game and birds are enclosed on higher land and gardening work involves harvesting.
- March–April (*Liatamanyi-Lungu*) – means full flood, this is a time when wedge-traps and other fishing methods are used.
- May (*Kandao*) – means that the flood turns and begins to fall. This is the time of weaving cone-fishing traps. Also fish spears and scoop-baskets are used in public waters.
- June (*Mbuwana*) – means that the flood has fallen. The king makes his ceremonial voyage to his plain capital with his people. A communal bird hunt and reed cutting occur during this month. Margin gardening also begins at this time.
- July (*Sikulu*) – means that the plain begins to dry and water is confined. Fishing, bush gardening and trading in wild fruits occur.
- August–September (*Muyana–Muimunene*) – mean that the plain is dry and the hot months set in. The centre of high fish supplies become concentrated in the mid-plain.

- October–November (*Yenda-Njimwana*) – mean that the rains begin. These months are characterised by the killing of fish in the shallows of pans, as well as net-fishing and fruit supplies. Garden planting also takes place this time.
- December (*Ng'ulule*) – this means the rains set in and the rivers begin to rise in order to start flooding. Gardening involves planting, weeding and guarding crops from birds.

The 'garment' metaphor of flooding provides various ecological benefits and arguments. The Lozi territory is naturally prone to desertification minus a flood. The extreme heat of the area around August to October of each year tends to facilitate the breeding of various disease-carrying organisms. Such organisms tend to be flushed out each time by floods, which drain the vectors to the Indian Ocean. The floods, moreover, support various wildlife, environmental and biological growth processes, including creating conducive niches for fish breeding. The general fertility of the plains is facilitated by flooding which deposits silt. These various ecological functions of floods are to be found in other cultural practices that 'welcome' floods and flooding, for example, the purposeful flooding of the water meadows in the United Kingdom, which can be ecologically explained by the bringing in of fertile alluvial silt to stimulate soil fertility and growth.

In Contrast, the Dutch view of flood as 'enemy' as recorded by Schama:

... helps account for the nationalist intransigence of kindred frontier cultures: the Boer trekkers of the South African Veldt, the godly settlers of the early American Frontier, even the agrarian pioneers of Zionist Palestine (1987: 53).

It can never be doubted that there is a clear, researchable connection between a people's view of flood as enemy and the unleashing of some kaleidoscopic machinery of violence and conflict. Moreover, the enemy metaphor which has historically been immanent in the interpretation of flooding tends to spawn concepts that govern scientific thought, language and actions. The way we think, what we experience and what we do technologically and scientifically with floods globally is very much a matter of the historical legacy of interpreting flood as 'enemy'. This is the case with familiar concepts and practices like polder, drainage, embankment, the delta project and land reclamation, on the one hand, and hazard, risk, vulnerability, damage or catastrophe, on the other.

Conclusion

Several conclusions are possible and this paper will not exhaust all of them. Firstly, southern Africa, in general, and the Lozi case, in particular, provides scholars with positive opportunities to challenge the overpowering heritage of flood as enemy. The whole Barotse plain when in flood can become a 'laboratory' for scholarly investigations on the nature of flooding. Secondly, academic concepts we use in ordinary discourse around the theme of flooding may not be wholly neutral in themselves, but can be linked clearly to cultural situations of particular peoples. In this case, the hazard notion is clearly a cultural distillate of the Dutch experience of flood as enemy. This notion helps to caution people about the real threat to life and its connection to death and destruction.

Thirdly, in examining the historical roots of our ecological crisis the research challenge becomes partly to critically explore the negative influence of the 'enemy' philosophy of flooding for a thousand years or more as was practically manifested in a polder project described below:

... the history of ecological change is still so rudimentary that we know little about what really happened or what the results were... On more intricate matters it often is impossible to find solid information. For a thousand years or more the Frisians and Hollanders have been pushing back the North Sea, and the process is culminating in our own time in the reclamation of the Zuider Zee. What, if any, species of animals, birds, fish, shorelife or plants have died out in the process? In their epic combat with Neptune have the Netherlands overlooked ecological values in such a way that the quality of human life in The Netherlands has suffered? I cannot discover that the questions have ever been asked, much less answered (White, 1967:342).

It is likely that, for many such wetlands under the impact of the enemy view of flooding, human life in those respective polders may have become an enemy event which engendered irreversible negative change in the form of famine, desertification, wildlife depletion, drying of aquifers or drought conditions. Many of the destructive consequences wrought by the enemy view of flood as reflected in polder projects could also contribute significantly to what is described by Swain (1993), as migration, social conflicts, fluctuation and deterioration in the standard of living. Research by southern African investigators is needed to explore these postulations. All these negative environmental consequences underscore the point that if (flood) water is life (Thales) and that water is regarded to be an enemy object, then life itself becomes an enemy event also.

Fourthly, what is emerging from the above presentation of the Lozi experience to move us forward in life and academic discourse with reference to floods is that flood remains a crucial agency of reconstructing reality. The Lozi story challenges humanity to consider new opportunities of relating to floods in order to obtain supportive benefits from these waters, including possibilities of re-shaping reality away from violence, conflict and exploitation of one people by another. It is just conceivable, in this regard, that some of the perpetual conflicts and violence of certain areas of our world may continue raging largely because both actors in the war may have inherited the same types of mental processes and relationships of Noah's flood as 'enemy'. Such a possibility offers us challenges to move the academic discourse of Noah and other types of flood forward in order to reshape life. This is in view of the point that our world has evidence of an alternative, visible flood view as illustrated, amongst others, by the Lozi experience.

Finally, the account presented in this paper has some great significance for environmental education of the 21st century and beyond. Interested educationists are invited to take their students to Loziland around February-March of each year on fieldwork to witness for themselves the 'garment' idea in operation. Numerous educational activities could then be devised by teachers and their learners whilst in Loziland during this occasion; for instance,

photographing wildfowl, people and wildlife as these utilise various aspects of the flood. A Flood-Garment Research and Teaching Institute (in contrast to, say, the Middlesex Flood-Hazard Research Centre in Britain) could be established in the region to further explore the idea of flood as garment applicable to various communities scattered around the southern African territory.

Notes on the Contributor

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